

2 Chronicles 34:29-33 (NRSV)

²⁹Then the king sent word and gathered together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. ³⁰The king went up to the house of the LORD, with all the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites, all the people both great and small; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. ³¹The king stood in his place and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book. ³²Then he made all who were present in Jerusalem and in Benjamin pledge themselves to it. And the inhabitants of Jerusalem acted according to the covenant of God, the God of their ancestors. ³³Josiah took away all the abominations from all the territory that belonged to the people of Israel, and made all who were in Israel worship the LORD their God. All his days they did not turn away from following the LORD the God of their ancestors.

2 Timothy 3:10-17 (NRSV)

¹⁰Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. ¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

We claim to be, as Bishop Willimon puts it, a people of the book. But how central to our lives and our faith is the Bible, this collection of ancient sacred writings?

What if all the Bibles disappeared? Every one of them. From our homes, our churches, our libraries. Even from our hard drives and the internet. And all the ancient manuscripts as well. Every last one of them. And all the references and quotations in other writings. . . All of it simply gone, never to be recovered.

How would Christianity change? In our generation? Our children's? Our grandchildren's? Would the body of Christ survive? Could there be a church without the Bible?

More than 600 years before Jesus, the people of God discovered that they had been confronted with these questions.

The discovery of a recovery

The history of the ancient Israelite kingdoms is marked by a seemingly endless stream of bad kings, one after another taking the people away from God. There were a few bright lights in the royal families, but not many. The last century before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was no different. King Manasseh of Judah (686-641 BC) embodied all that could go right and go wrong. His early years on the throne were an abomination to God, as he led the people to other gods. But imprisonment by the Assyrians brought genuine repentance to Manasseh, who, after returning to Jerusalem, tore down all the image of other gods and the altars used to worship them. Manasseh was succeeded by his son, Amon, whose short reign mirrored the terrible days of Manasseh's early years. After Amon's assassination, his son, Josiah, took the throne though he was only eight!

The Chronicler tells us that Josiah reigned thirty-one years (639-609 BC). As the Chronicler writes, "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left" (2 Chronicles 34:2). When Josiah was sixteen, we are told he began to seek God. When he was twenty he purged the kingdom of all the altars, tents, images, and so on that were used for the worship of foreign gods and he ordered the execution of the idolatrous priests. When Josiah was twenty-six,

he led the people in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Everyone in the kingdom contributed wealth to this project and “the people did the work faithfully.”

In the course of the reconstruction, the workers made a staggering discovery. They found a copy of “the book of the law of the LORD given to Moses,” perhaps Deuteronomy. It isn’t the discovery of the book that staggers me, it is the fact that they had lost it in the first place. When he learns of the book’s recovery, Josiah tears his clothes in anguish and dismay for he knew that the people had not been keeping the covenant with God.

First, Josiah sends the scrolls to a prophet, Huldah, to confirm that they are actually the books of the law. Then, after confirmation, King Josiah calls all the people to the temple, where he reads to them the entire “book of the covenant.” After the reading is finished, Josiah pledges himself to a life of obedience to God and the covenant, and he makes the people do the same.

When Josiah went seeking God at the young age of sixteen, he could not have imagined that God would reveal himself to Josiah in this way, through the discovery of the long lost

Warping into Scripture??¹

"Frank walked out of the MRI imaging center, then looked at his wristwatch before placing a call on his cell phone and hailing a cab."

A rather ordinary sequence of events nowadays. But try and explain that passage to someone who lived in biblical times. Even if you translated it into Greek or Aramaic, it wouldn’t make any sense because your audience would not have the contextual framework to understand what happened. But if you could – in a manner of speaking – thrust that person through a contextual time warp where the cell phone, cab, etc. were at least explained in a framework he could process, then his understanding of the passage would be quantumly enhanced.

Now go the other way. Just because we live in technologically advanced times, we face *no less* of a challenge in understanding the context of the Bible and the times in which it was written. Without the context, the message of God is – simply put – garbled in transmission. Therefore it is vital, so to speak, to warp yourself into the context of the era when the Scriptures were written.

It comes down to this: we try to pull God into our story when we ought to be stepping into God’s story. We need to enter the Bible, to step within God’s story so that we can discover who God is, who we are, and find there the answers to the deepest questions of our lives.

There’s a reason that the Bible is largely a collection of stories. We can enter a story in a way that we cannot enter any other type of literature. We can inhabit a story. We can imagine ourselves in a story. We can warp into Scripture.

continued in the page 3 textbox

1. Payne Harrison, a member of our congregation, gave me this brilliant illustration of “warping” into Scripture as a way of driving home the need to bring context and connection to our reading of the Bible.

Torah. In the coming centuries, as the Jews were battered and torn by one oppressor after another, commitment to the collection, composition, editing, and copying of the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets became a prominent part of Judaism. And after the final destruction of the second temple in 70AD, Judaism became a religion built around the reading and study of these writings.

A living legacy

The apostle Paul had a younger protégé, Timothy, whom he urged to “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.” Timothy is to cling to the “sacred writings” that will teach him about salvation through faith in Jesus.

These writings are what we often call the Hebrew scriptures or the Old Testament. They can’t be the New Testament, for though some of the NT writings existed at the time, none had been collected or disseminated as “scripture.” Nonetheless, these OT writings, which never mention Jesus by name, still point to him as the realization of God’s millennia-old promises to redeem humanity.

Thus, though Paul can’t be talking about the NT, his words still reveal the long Jewish tradition of there being sacred writings that are inspired in a way that other very helpful writings are not. “God-breathed,” as Paul puts it in the Greek.

The UMC holds that the writings that constitute Scripture are the 39 books of the OT and the 27 books of the NT. Other Christians would define the list a bit differently, but all Christians embrace the central place of Scripture of the body of Christ. As Josiah and the Jews learned 2,600 years ago and as Paul reminded Timothy, we are truly a people of the book.

Warping into Scripture: Connection and Context (cont.)

But warping into Scripture is hard, often more difficult than we think. After all, the Bible is ancient literature. We are a long way removed from the world of pharaohs and Pharisees. We need to be biblically literate if we are going to enter these stories and see the richness of God's word. We cannot read Scripture well if we lack the basic skills, which are grounded in *context* and *connection*.

Every biblical story and passage is embedded in an historical, geographical, and cultural *context*. The more we understand about this context, the richer our reading of the story. Knowing that Jewish men certainly did not pick up the hem of their garment and run, deepens our appreciation of the father's joy at the return of the prodigal son. Knowing that women didn't make trips to the well at midday, helps us to know that the Samaritan woman Jesus meets at a well has come at a time when she can avoid others. Knowing that the Jews despised the Samaritans is essential to reading the parable of the good Samaritan as shocking and subversive.

In addition to context, we need to be able to *connect* one story or passage to others. There is an over-arching unity in the Bible; it's the story of God's work to renew the cosmos and restore humanity to the loving relationship with God for which we are created. Every story or passage has something to offer on its own, but grasping the larger meaning helps us to hear the echoes of Scripture that are woven throughout the Bible and to see ourselves properly as actors in this ongoing narrative.

Here are a few examples. How many of us really connect the story of the Exodus with the story of Jesus' last supper and crucifixion? How many connect Jesus' many references to himself as the Son of Man with Daniel 7? How many connect the Revelation 22 promise that we shall see God's face with Moses' inability to see God's face and live? How many connect Jesus' temple cleansing with Jeremiah 7? In these and countless other connections, the deep richness and transformative power of Scripture is revealed.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, NOV 11 – 17

Sunday, 2 Samuel 7:1-17 This is a crucial chapter. God makes a covenant with David that someone from his family will forever sit on the throne of Israel.

Monday, 2 Samuel 7:18-29 David praises God and expresses his own unworthiness.

Tuesday, 2 Samuel 8 This chapter is devoted to David's military successes.

Wednesday, 2 Samuel 9 We return to the story of Mephibosheth and David's kindness towards him. What is the point of this story?

Thursday, 2 Samuel 10 More of David's military victories

Friday, 2 Samuel 11:1-27a We come to the story of David's great sin. How could a person after God's own heart possibly commit such a sin, conspiring to murder the husband of his pregnant, adulterous lover.

Saturday, Psalm 51 In 2 Samuel 12, God will send the prophet Nathan to confront David over his sin. The book of Psalms attributes this psalm to David, written at the time of his adultery and murder.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin this week by discussing the questions with which I opened the study. "What if all the Bibles disappeared? . . . Simply gone, never to be recovered. How would Christianity change? Would the body of Christ survive? Could there be a church without the Bible? What do you think Bishop Willimon means when he calls United Methodists a people of the book? Do you agree with him? Do you think we look that way to other Christians?

How central a place does the Bible really hold in the church? in the UMC? in St. Andrew? Are we a scripturally-formed congregation? How would such a congregation differ from one that is not scripturally-formed?

Do you think that we tend to read or talk about the Bible more than we actually read it? If so, why do you think we don't spend more time reading the Bible? Why do we find it so easy to neglect the Bible? What barriers are there to our becoming better readers of the Bible? How can we overcome these barriers? How can we help our children to be people of the book?